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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000309

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: ACTING FM DISCUSSES CLUSTER BOMBS,
PALESTINIANS, ARMS SMUGGLING

REF: STATE 17728

Classified By: DCM Christopher W. Murray. Reason: Sections 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) On February 27 Acting Foreign Minister Tarek Mitri raised Lebanese concerns on cluster munitions, support for the Palestinian government, and most significantly, how to address Hizballah arms smuggling across the Syrian-Lebanese border. Mitri set forth standard positions on cluster bombs, noting that the GOL would support an international convention to ban these weapons. He also asked that the U.S. and the EU end an embargo on aid and contacts with the Palestinian government in the wake of Mecca. On arms smuggling, he pointed out that the UN SYG's Senior Advisor Michael Williams is in Beirut this week to work on the UNSCR 1701 implementation report. The GOL's chief concern is how the report will treat arms smuggling to Hizballah from across the Syrian border. Mitri made the case that the GOL is doing as much as it can to stop smuggling, and that while Israel continues to make accusations, it has provided no substantiation of its charges. Mitri acknowledged that some weapons were no doubt getting through, but expressed frustration that no one was documenting a pattern of sustained and systematic smuggling. He said more pressure should be put on Syria to respect UNSCR 1701, and that Lebanon would not object to the establishment of a sanctions committee. End Summary.

OSLO CONFERENCE ON CLUSTER WEAPONS

2. (C) Acting Lebanese Foreign Minister Tarek Mitri met for an hour one-on-one with DCM on February 27 to review several pending issues. Mitri started off by acknowledging two exchanges on cluster bombs during the past month, and referred to domestic U.S. debate in the Congress on cluster bombs. He again thanked the U.S. for its contribution of USD 10 million to remove unexploded ordnance in the south. Mitri, however, then objected that the U.S. paper provided to him on cluster munitions (reftel) implied a symmetry between Israeli and Hizballah use of cluster bombs during the summer war. He said he was not at all sure that was an accurate characterization of the nature or scope of cluster bomb use by the two sides.

3. (C) Mitri said Lebanon was an active participant at the

February 22 Oslo conference on cluster munitions, which was attended by about 40 countries, mostly from the developing world, but also including some Europeans and non-governmental organizations. He said he may hold a press conference on the Oslo meeting. Lebanon endorses the conference's aim of an international convention on cluster munitions, and would continue to pursue the issue. He admitted that countries such as the UK, France and the U.S. were not parties to the conference, and may favor selected use of these weapons in certain settings. DCM replied that the U.S. position on cluster munitions remains as we had previously presented it. Mitri concluded by saying that the GOL would like to hear more from Washington about what the U.S. has said, or will say, to Israel about the cluster munitions used in southern Lebanon, as implied in the U.S. paper.

SPANISH CONFERENCE: PALESTINIANS

14. (C) Mitri reported that he attended a conference in Spain last week, chaired by Foreign Minister Moratinos. The pretext of the session had been the opening of a Spanish-Arab cultural center, but Moratinos wanted to talk politics. Mitri said he had not intended to attend, but with the presence of 15 Arab foreign ministers and six other Arab ministers, he felt that he had to go. Moratinos had led a three-hour session which took up Iraq and Lebanon, but focused mainly the Mecca agreement and the Palestinians.

15. (C) Mitri said the impetus of the conference was to speak with one voice in getting the U.S. and EU to lift "the embargo" on the Palestinians. The countries present in Madrid agreed to contact the U.S. and EU member states to

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urge an easing of restrictions on aid to the Palestinian government. There was a sense of disappointment that neither the U.S. nor the EU had endorsed Mecca. Mitri commented that he would be seeing the German ambassador shortly, in his German EU presidency capacity, to urge contact and help for the post-Mecca government. In sum, Mitri said, there was nothing more concrete in terms of concerted action than, "urging the members of the Quartet to give Mecca a chance to succeed."

ARMS SMUGGLING FROM SYRIA TO HIZBALLAH

17. (C) On this issue, Mitri said, he wanted to present as a question. In a couple of hours, he would be meeting with the UN SYG's Senior Advisor on the Middle East, Michael Williams, now in Lebanon to work on the UNSCR 1701 report due in March.

He said he would raise standard subjects with Williams: Sheba'a Farms, the Israeli overflights, and prisoners. But the issue of real concern to him was securing Lebanon's borders against arms smuggling from Syria. He noted that the Secretary had brought up this subject in Paris on the margins

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of the Paris III Donors' Conference. He understood the Secretary to have said that the Israelis confirmed that arms

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are coming into Lebanon, and that the Lebanese need to show that action is being taken to stem this inflow. "What should be Lebanon's approach?" he asked.

18. (C) Mitri then became somewhat plaintive. He said that in Paris, the Lebanese side had reported to the Secretary what they have done, and that security is improving greatly along the northern border. The Germans are developing a pilot border control program for the Lebanese in the north. This system could be extended to the east and south if feasible. Mitri asserted that, "there is no complicity between the arms smugglers and the Army," but at the same time, he said he did not want to deny that some arms may be

coming in. "We're doing as much as we can. We'll try to do more, but it is partly a question of resources, especially for the Army, which has been on constant alert." DCM replied that whatever smuggling is going on must be stopped. An additional effort, apart from the borders, would be for all of Lebanon's security services to monitor the possible movement of illegal weapons inside the country. The case of the truck that was stopped at the Hazmieh intersection near Beirut, carrying arms for Hizballah, was an excellent example of what could be done. Mitri took the point, but noted that these weapons were for Hizballah's internal use, rather than for potential attack against Israel. DCM pointed out that the U.S. statements in Paris were followed up with references to U.S. desire to enhance the Army's and the Internal Security Services' capabilities. We are following closely the German effort and support its aims.

¶9. (C) Mitri, still frustrated, said that none of the reports about arms smuggling from Syria to Hizballah in Lebanon have been substantiated with evidence. When the UNSC had discussed this subject in December, the UNSC chose not to include any verification of cross-border arms smuggling in its report.

¶10. (C) Mitri then suggested that more pressure be put on Syria to comply with UNSCR 1701 on arms smuggling. He recalled that when he made this point to Secretary Rice in Paris, she had replied with the possibility of UNSC action toward a sanctions or disarmament committee. Mitri affirmed that such options would be fine with Lebanon. He cautioned that assigning border surveillance duties to UNIFIL is not a viable political option, especially given French concerns with force protection, and UNIFIL's absence of desire to perform such a role. The two best approaches for now, he concluded, were technical assistance on the borders, and pressure on the Syrians.

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